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II. Obedience, School of Liberty

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1.4.2 At a Community Level

- How frequent are our community meetings?
- Do they consist merely in planning for the week or the month or are they also occasions of sharing, reflection and evaluation?
- Do all the members of the community have the possibility of expressing themselves or does one person monopolise the meeting?

1.4.3 At Circumscription Level

- Do Superiors and their councils give sufficient attention to experienced and gifted confreres to be trained for discernment in helping candidates for the Spiritan life to discern their vocation?
- Within the Council of the Circumscription, do confreres have regard to the views of the members of the Formation team concerning the candidates who are making their requests to them?

II. OBEDIENCE, SCHOOL OF LIBERTY

2.1 FULFILMENT AND INDIVIDUAL LIBERTY

*W*e only have to open our eyes. The enticing images which are used by certain media outlets and advertising posters exalt individual liberty. Professional success, accompanied by important projects, result in a great freedom of action. Such images contribute to placing the stress on individual liberty, a liberty that is tainted by subjectivism. This

idea can be found making its way insidiously into all societies and penetrates mentalities. In this context, obedience to the law or to authority is often seen as an attack on the development of the person. However, the choice of a state in life, no matter what it may be, leads people to accept unforeseen constraints.

But it is not all negative. The most normal thing for a person is to be able to develop himself according to his talents or his tastes. Education aims precisely at facilitating the passage of an individual from dependence to self-development seen in the context of interdependence.

Thus we see too many people being forced to do what they do not like, if only to survive. The forced renunciation linked to such situations gives rise to deep frustration, because such individuals find that they are not able to express everything of which they are capable. To have the possibility of giving the best of oneself is an essential element of the dignity of every human being and it is for this that individuals and groups have fought and continue to fight.

2.2 A LOOK AT THE RENUNCIATION PRACTICED BY CLAUDE POUILLART DES PLACES

A Man of Ambition Who Loved Freedom

In his time, Claude Poullart des Places had to answer this question: "What do I do to attain complete fulfilment?" His desire for liberty and renown was in keeping with his ambition. In that brutally honest portrait that he made of himself, during his retreats, he recognised that his taste for "independence" was linked with being "the slave of greatness".⁶

⁶ Claude-François Poullart des Places, *Writings*, Spiritan Centre Rome 1988, p. 42.

“At the moment, you are so lacking in fidelity, you cherish liberty so much.”⁷ He knew that appearance at the royal court was essential for recognition. He also knew that his family cherished great ambitions for him. “My father, who is old, will leave considerable assets which very few people, apart from myself, would be capable of administering.”⁸ This same family was depending on him to gild once more that family escutcheon which had been tarnished for many decades. His academic brilliance and his eloquence seemed to mark him out for the Parliament of Brittany. His success seemed assured. A real interior struggle began in him when he experienced the call to serve the Lord in another way. “You know that I am bound to submit to and obey my dear parents who cannot see their way to approving such a plan and I owe it to them to do nothing which would be against their will.”⁹ It is impossible not to hear the reasonable expectations of a family!

I Am Determined To Walk In the Way That You Will Show Me

However, Claude-Francois soon renounced all his desires for greatness and liberty. When he put on the lawyer’s gown which his mother had prepared for him, everything turned upside down. He would never put it on again. It was an irrevocable decision but one that conformed to a desire that had lain deep within him for a long time. It became clear to him that real fulfilment lay not in the honours which a high rank in society would provide but in a complete and free acceptance of the will of God.

⁷ Ibid p. 45.

⁸ Ibid.

⁹ Ibid p.49

To reach such a decision, our founder placed himself completely at the disposal of God “in a state more conducive to hearing your wise counsel”¹⁰. It was not surprising that in the end, he declared himself ready to respond to the call he had heard. “You have undertaken, O Lord, to lead my steps, since I am resolved to walk in the way that you will show me. I renounce all those advantages which could flatter me... Speak, my God, to my heart; I am ready to obey you.”¹¹

Poullart des Places offers no further resistance. His entire self-giving would lead him to Paris, where, while continuing with his own formation, he would devote himself whole-heartedly, to helping the poor and to establishing the community which would become the Seminary of the Holy Spirit.

2.3 OBEDIENCE AND FREEDOM

Obedience is a school of freedom and freedom is at the heart of obedience. Through the decisions that have been taken, each one prepares himself to undertake a project that will be at the service of the Gospel. Each one’s relation with God will henceforth be the yardstick by which he will measure his relations with other people. The more we acquire this freedom in obedience, the more we will be responding to the will of God. Four conditions at least are necessary in acquiring such freedom

Openness to the Holy Spirit

“Docility”, “abandonment”, “self-denial”, “renunciation of self” – these are the terms in which our Founders expressed openness to the Holy Spirit and they contain an element of

¹⁰ Ibid p. 18.

¹¹ Ibid p. 41.

surprise if not of actual fear! They go against the thinking of many of our contemporaries. However, availability is the basic crucible whence springs Spiritan spirituality. "Under the action of the Holy Spirit, consecrated life itself becomes mission"¹². Thus, availability deepens to become availability to the Lord and to all people (TA 1.1.3). How else could we declare that we follow Jesus in his obedience if we do not allow ourselves to be guided by the Spirit?

Like Poullart des Places, Father Libermann continually insists on this aspect in his letters. From 1835 onwards, concerning candidates who presented themselves, he wrote that they "might have a docile spirit and without attachment to their own way of seeing things and their own will."¹³ Less than a year before his death he wrote to M. Duby: "May your spirit submit itself to the Spirit of Our Lord Jesus Christ."¹⁴ To M. Blanpin's anxieties, he replied, using the familiar image of the sailing ship. "Your soul is the ship, the heart represents the sail, the Holy Spirit is the wind that blows into your will and the soul moves towards the goal which God proposes."¹⁵ And Libermann concludes: "You are not yet formed." He still had to give way to the action of the Spirit within him. This is a grace which must be requested!

Necessary Renunciations

Such availability does not come without renunciations. Once again, this is a strange word for our contemporaries. Nevertheless, the daily reality for many people is made up of renunciations which one experiences or takes on. We only have

¹² Cf. *Beginning with Christ* no.9.

¹³ *Lettres Spirituelles* I, p. 131.

¹⁴ Letter of 06/05/1851, ND XIII, p. 141.

¹⁵ Letter to M. Blanpin, April 1845, ND VII, p. 148. The same image is used in ND XII, p. 351.

to look around us. Circumstances such as the birth of a child, or work timetables, sickness or unemployment often make it necessary for people to adjust their plans, whether they be the plans of an individual, a family or a group. The result is that they are not able to follow an idea or a path which had previously seemed to be so clearly traced out.

Religious life is not a straight line like an unchanging trajectory. Again and again, it asks us to update our response to the call we have heard by taking circumstances into account. This will not happen without renunciation of our own plans, even legitimate ones.

- Sickness has only to make its appearance in our lives for us to look differently at everything, even missionary involvement.
- It can happen that the departure of a confrere requires that another renounce some enterprise where he was finding fulfilment.
- More subtle perhaps are prejudice and cultural arrogance.¹⁶ These rise up like a wall that cannot be crossed which seals off its own world and prevents the appreciation of a word which would challenge a particular way of seeing things. Renouncing one's culture, making "oneself black with the blacks" – is not this the ultimate step we have to take on the road to the liberation of self?

Obedience becomes a school of freedom when each one takes on the contradictions which prevent him from realising what he had foreseen. "Obedience is the renunciation of one's own spirit and one's own will in order to submit to the holy will of God manifested through the rules of the Congregation and by

¹⁶ Cf. Itaiçi General Chapter, 11.

superiors.”¹⁷ But in many cases, individual immaturity, unhealthy attachments and other forms of dependence trap people and result in self-centredness, even narcissism. We will flourish on our path of obedience only when we as individuals become aware of the ways in which we are enslaved and undertake to open ourselves to perspectives which challenge our way of thinking and living.

Taking Personal Talents into Account

Even if obedience leads to renunciation, it cannot be the same thing as the annihilation of the individual person. There is room for the recognition of personal talent. There is no such thing as a uniform Spiritan profile but rather a variety of gifts, placed at the service of the mission received, that helps the Church to grow. This particular awareness brings with it many consequences for Spiritan life.

No one, in the name of obedience, can be brought to do that of which he is not capable. Such a case would bring with it a sense of self-dissatisfaction or a sense of distaste in the accomplishment of a particular task and would give rise to deep frustration.

Spiritans cannot be changed about at will. Not everyone can be a teacher or a parish priest or a bursar or a superior or a formator! This is so not only because individual confreres might not have the required competence, but also because they might not have the taste for a particular task. What is the point of appointing or electing confreres for such positions if they are lacking the personal charism for the task in question?

Each one is called to discern how he can put his personal talents at the service of all, without, however, proclaiming him-

¹⁷ Libermann, Provisional Rule, Chapter IV, article I, ND II, p. 269.

self to be an expert in a particular field or claiming a particular appointment as his due.

There is no doubt that, in order to be available to the Spirit, it is important to constantly search for that difficult balance between the necessary renunciations which are inherent in the vow of obedience and the valuing of personal talents. It is there that we see that inner freedom which is the source of growth and development.

Having a Responsible Attitude

Obedience, because it is the school of freedom, rejects both complacency and group conformity. It does not accept a contrived protective attitude which falsifies interpersonal relations. Because it frees us from all fear, the vow of obedience leads the religious to responsibility. This responsibility has many facets.

- In a world which is becoming increasingly more complex, the Spiritan takes the necessary means to ensure that his approach is right and appropriate. Our contemporaries have to continually adapt themselves to face new challenges which are posed by the development of techniques, ideas and situations. If they do not engage in this, they are responsible and they have to accept the consequences. Religious obedience is to be found at the crossroads where availability to the Spirit, who frees us from all thirst for power, meets the need for a responsible approach to live out our mission in an attitude of service to the poor (SRL 82).
- All actions in our lives engage the responsibility of the individual. This cannot be reduced to a development defined simply by personal success. Our activities, whatever they might be, have no place in a private domain which

would favour individualism. That is the reason why it is always necessary to account for what it is we do or undertake. Individual responsibility is part of the responsibility of the entire Congregation in the prophetic mission which belongs to it (SRL 36).

- It can happen that confreres, through a display of disobedience, can be guilty of criminal acts. They must assume the consequences. If responsibility can be established, it is fitting that the canonical sanctions be accepted (Canon Law, Chapter VI) as well as the sanctions contained in the law of the country where a confrere lives. It is time that we rid ourselves of that impunity which fails to resolve a problem but which on the contrary fatally damages relationships.

2.4 SO WHERE ARE WE AT?

2.4.1 At a Personal Level

- What are the renunciations which have cost me the most? Why?
- What are my personal gifts and how do I place them at the service of all?
- What must I still give up so that I might respond completely to the Word of God?

2.4.2 At Community Level

- In Spiritan community, how do we recognise the gifts of different individuals and how are they integrated into the common vision of mission?

- Do community meetings allow Spiritans to account for their activities and their initiatives?

2.4.3 At Circumscription Level

- How does a circumscription deal with confreres who are guilty of criminal acts? Does it cover up such deeds and allow the matter to pass away? Does the circumscription assist confreres to take responsibility for such acts and take the necessary sanctions? How does the circumscription help the victims of such confreres' acts?

III. OBEDIENCE: THE PATH OF COMMUNION

3.1 OBEDIENCE FACE TO FACE WITH INDIVIDUALISM AND AUTHORITARIANISM

*E*veryone is in agreement on this point – obedience sits very uncomfortably with two contradictory realities – individualism and authoritarianism.

In the case of individualism, the person builds up a private domain around himself where no one has the right to look in. In this case, obedience is in conflict with personal interests. It is beyond doubt that Spiritans share in a general tendency, often decried in so many chapters but still very tenacious within us - the tendency towards individualism which undermines common projects and promotes both misunderstanding and suspicion. Despite the beautifully-worded messages from capitular documents on community life, the facts are self-evident and individualism continues its way undisturbed.